FIRECE LOVE
APRIL 5, 2009
PALM SUNDAY

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FOURTH PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

Psalm 118:1–2, 19–29
Isaiah 50:5–7
Mark 11:1–11

"I have set my face like flint."
Isaiah 50:7 (NRSV)

I simply argue that the cross be raised
at the center of the marketplace as well as
the steeple of the church. . . . Jesus was not
crucified in a cathedral between two candles
but on a cross between two thieves,
on the town garbage heap, at a crossroads so
cosmopolitan that they had to write his name in
Hebrew and Latin and Greek . . . at the kind of
place where cynics talk smut and thieves
curse and soldiers gamble. Because that is
where he died and that is what he died about,
and that is where church people ought to be and
what church people ought to be about.

George MacLeod,
Founder of the Iona Community

The children welcomed you with their laughter and their singing centuries ago.
And so have our children this morning. O God, may we, who are in the crowd,
acknowledge that this procession is the prelude to crucifixion, that his fierce love
will lead to his death. Open our hearts once again to the power and mystery of this holiest of weeks, until we gather again to witness and celebrate his victory. Amen.

Everyone loves a parade. And there is none better than the one that happens here on Palm Sunday, as our children parade in, waving palm branches, while we sing "All Glory, Laud, and Honor." And it is even better

if you have a few grandchildren in the crowd. There is something irresistible about marching bands, military units in precision, floats and dignitaries, fire engines, horse troops, and clowns on stilts. Who doesn't love a parade?

But sometimes a parade gets out of hand. The saying is popular in New York City that on St. Patrick's Day, "the Irish march up Fifth Avenue and fall down Third" (William Sloane Coffin, *Collected Sermons*). A little bit of that happened here in Chicago at the South Side Irish St. Patrick's Day Parade, originally organized to be a kind of family and neighborhood friendly alternative to the official St. Patrick's Day Parade in the Loop. The motto for the day of the South Side Parade, which begins with Mass, is "Pray—Parade —and Party," which is what happened with a vengeance, particularly the party part. In fact, the organizers cancelled future South Side parades, because in their judgment it was out of hand, or close, this year, with a lot of underage drinking and public drunkenness. There were fifty-four arrests, and some police officers were assaulted.

Sometimes a parade gets out of hand, and sometimes a crowd becomes a mob. It happened in Chicago in Grant Park in the summer of 1968 during the Democratic National Convention. I thought about how a crowd can become a dangerous mob almost instantaneously as I watched aerial shots of the G-20 protestors outside the Bank of England last week. From the air, the crowd almost seemed like a single alive organism, undulating, moving back and forth, thousands of people pressing steadily forward against a single line of police officers. And you know—because you can see it—that if a police officer falls or if a protester takes a swing, the crowd will break through the line and become a mob capable of very destructive and dangerous behavior.

There was a parade in Jerusalem long ago, one that the authorities worried might get out of control. It seemed like a spontaneous event, but on more careful reading, one man appears to have thought about it and planned it. Jesus was his name, a rabbi, teacher, healer, from Galilee in the north. He has come to Jerusalem, the capital city, with a small band of followers, to celebrate the Jewish Passover. He could have entered the city through one of the massive gates—along with thousands of other pilgrims—relatively unnoticed. But a few miles outside the city, he begins to act peculiarly, instructs his friends to go ahead to the next village and get a small donkey colt that he has apparently arranged for. And then he does something he never did before as far as anyone knows: he sits on the donkey, and starting just outside the city, at the Mount of Olives, he rides in. Everyone who saw it would have immediately understood what was going on. It's right there in scriptures, the prophet Zechariah:

> Rejoice greatly, O daughter Zion!
> Shout aloud, O daughter Jerusalem!

> Lo, your king comes to you;
> triumphant and victorious is he,
> humble, and riding on a donkey,
> on a colt, the foal of a donkey.
> (Zechariah 9:9)

And so, when they see it—this Messianic procession—they erupt. The crowds believe, because it is in their scripture, that when the Messiah comes, he will be riding on a donkey and he will come from the Mount of Olives. So people erupt with cheers and shouts and Hosannas and Hallelujahs, and they strip their coats from their backs and branches from the trees and lay them in his path. Marcus Borg and John Dominic Crossan, in their fine book about the final days of Jesus, say that Palm Sunday was a planned political demonstration. That's certainly what it looked like to the authorities. It is the Passover, after all. The people are celebrating their liberation from Egyptian slavery centuries before. They're thinking about freedom. The authorities know that there are armed revolutionaries, who call themselves Zealots, hiding in the hills, training, now and then swooping down on a Roman outpost, killing everyone, waiting for the right moment to attack. They are a force to be taken very seriously. What better time to fall on the Romans than during Passover, with security already strained to the breaking point? So everybody is watching this parade very carefully. The crowd, the people who think they just may be part of history as the Messiah comes, the Zealots sharpening their swords for the battle they assume he will start, rehearsing how when the last Roman—including the governor Pontius Pilate—is dead, they will install him, or maybe one of their own, on the throne of David, the sovereign king of a sovereign Israel. They will be his honor guard, his Marine Corps. The religious leaders, chief priests, scribes, Pharisees who love God and their nation and their temple and their religion see all of it endangered by this troublemaker from the rural countryside and his gang of uneducated, unsophisticated, unruly, and excitable rubes. If they go too far—if this parade gets out of hand—the Romans will turn on all of them. And then there are the Romans, the thin line of legionnaires, the world's finest warriors, yet far from home, supply lines stretched, stationed in a place where everyone loathes them, as vulnerable as our own soldiers today in Afghanistan and Iraq.

Everyone who ever thought about this asks the same question: "Why?" Why did he come to Jerusalem, into this overheated political caldron, the very seat of the powerful people who oppose him? Why? He seems to know exactly what he's getting himself into. He repeatedly tells his followers that the result of this journey will be, at best, terrible conflict and suffering and, at worst, death. They are frightened. They try to persuade him not to go. Why, indeed, not remain up north, in the safety of Galilee, among his own people, people who love him, gather wherever he goes to listen to him speak, people who bring their sick, their elderly, their babies to him for the

simple blessing of his touch? He has so much more to say and do, so much more life to live. Why indeed?

Sometimes you have to do what you have to do. Sometimes, to be you, you have to stretch, risk, go where you have never gone before. At the very least this Jesus knew and believed—that something of God was in him, that it was his job, his vocation, his calling to show that something of God in his own life, to be that something of God. He could not do that in the safety of Galilee. He had to come to Jerusalem. Up until now, whenever the subject of who he was came up, he instructed his friends to tell no one—tell no one that he was the Christ, the Messiah, the son of God. But now, he is, it seems, claiming that title openly, that vocation of showing his people the reality of God.

Some scholars suggest that as he and his company entered the city, this man on a mission, they may have been singing a favorite Passover psalm, number 118:

> Open to me the gates of righteousness,
> that I may enter through them
> and give thanks to the Lord.

Maybe the entire parade crowd, Jesus, his followers, the frightened disciples, the little children, maybe they were all singing:

> O give thanks to the Lord, for he is good;
> his steadfast love endures forever!

Much of the brilliance and uniqueness of Judaism, his own religion, is in those two words: “steadfast love.” The God he came to Jerusalem to reveal and to be is a God of steadfast love. The Hebrew root for “steadfast love” is the word for womb. That is, the God Jesus came to Jerusalem to reveal and to be loves like a mother loves her child—maybe the most tender, gentle, and at the same time the most fearless, fiercest love in the world. No one used language like that about God in antiquity. God is generally angry, judgmental, weighing human conduct and finding it unsatisfactory. God punishes the wicked, still a popular way to think about God, or is at least aloof, disinterested in humankind, human joy and sorrow, laughter, tragedy, suffering, and love. God, the Greeks at the time were teaching, can’t be God and be affected by or involved in temporal human affairs. But the Hebrew people experienced and Jesus revealed a very different God, a God who loves with a mother’s fearless and fierce love, a God who does get involved in human life, a God who promises to be with human beings every day, even in the dark valleys, the bad days, the valley of the shadow of death days, the days when you sit in church at the funeral of a friend. Even there: steadfast love, fierce love.

I think Jesus knew that love and decided to live out that fearless, fierce love, holding nothing back. I think he must have remembered an image in the book of the prophet Isaiah, a book with which he clearly was familiar.

> The Lord God helps me;
> therefore I have not been disgraced,
> therefore, I have set my face like flint.

Fierce love, his face like flint, he comes to the city.

He came to Jerusalem because Jerusalem is where God's love needs to be as well as in quiet Galilee. I think he knew exactly what he was doing, knew the risks, knew that he well might die. It was the strongest, bravest decision he ever made. I have always been compelled by the power of Jesus' decision to go to Jerusalem and what it says to us as we attempt to be his faithful followers. For years I have loved and opened and read from, around Palm Sunday, *Markings*, by Dag Hammarskjöld. It is one of the most dog-eared books I own and I have turned to it at every important time of decision and transition in my life. Dag Hammarskjöld was the Secretary General of the United Nations from 1953 until 1961. He died when his plane crashed while he was on a peace mission in Africa. Notes for a book he was planning were published posthumously under the title *Markings*. Hammarskjöld was deeply spiritual, although few people knew it at the time. *Markings* is a record of his relationship with God, his doubts and questions, his struggles with the purpose and meaning of his own life: "I don't know who—or what—put the question, I don't know when it was put. I don't even remember answering. But at some moment I did answer Yes to Someone—or Something—and from that hour I was certain that existence is meaningful and that, therefore, my life, in self-surrender, had a goal."

As he struggled with his own vocation and made the decision to lay his own life on the line, a decision that cost him his life, Hammarskjöld thought about Jesus and his decision to come to Jerusalem:

> A young man, adamant in his committed life. alone as he confronted his final destiny. . . . He had assented to a possibility in his being, of which he had his first inkling when he returned from the desert. If God required anything of him, he would not fail. Only recently, he thought, had he begun to see more clearly and to realize that the road of possibility might lead to the cross. He knew that he had to follow it . . . to the end. . . . A young man, adamant in his commitment, who walks the road of possibility to the end without self-pity or demand for sympathy, fulfilling the destiny he has chosen. (pp. 68–69)

Fierce love.

You cannot observe Palm Sunday without hearing the call to follow him into the city. It is a clear mandate to his people, his church, to this church, if you will, sitting here on this busy city avenue, a call to love and serve this city and its people, to roll up sleeves and risk bruises and dirty hands in extending his love to neighbors. You cannot observe this day when he injected himself into the confusion and complexity of the politics of his day without knowing where we need to be: at a particularly important moment in the State of Illinois, when political reform is being discussed seriously, when it seems as if our lawmakers may address our state's abysmal record of pay-to-play politics by establishing reasonable limits to campaign contributions. Because Jesus came to the city, that is where his followers should be, and it is where we are, through an organization we helped to found and support, Protestants for the Common Good: his church, his people, standing for integrity, transparency, accountability, taking a stand, taking a few risks, for the public good.

"I simply argue that the cross be raised at the center of the marketplace as well as the steeple of the church," the great Scotsman George MacLeod, minister, theologian, member of the House of Lords, said.

Jesus came to the city and died on the outskirts, on the garbage heap, at a cosmopolitan intersection, and that is where his church should be.

You cannot hear the story of Palm Sunday without asking where his people are today and where we should be.

Tutoring youngsters
Welcoming the hungry and homeless
Standing with those who are anxious and afraid, newly unemployed, without hopeful options
Welcoming the very young and the old
Visiting the sick
Comforting the grieving
Encouraging the discouraged

He came to the very heart, the center of the life of his people.

And so we strive to follow. Just last Friday the officers of this church met to hear a major report on our vision for the future and approved a new initiative to deepen and broaden our ministry here, to provide more space for our programs and mission. We're calling it Project Second Century: Called to Love and Serve.

Our mandate, our call, is global as well as local. Out of the concern of a group of members of the church about the AIDS epidemic in Africa—one of

them a native of Cameroon, a pharmacist; another a retired physician, a specialist in infectious diseases—there is a new AIDS clinic in Kumba, Cameroon. It is a partner with a hospital sponsored by the Presbyterian Church of Cameroon. It is doing very important work and has treated 1,100 patients. In a culture where the very existence of the HIV virus and AIDS was at first denied and where means of preventing infection were never mentioned, were distrusted, and were publicly condemned by some religious leaders, as happened a few weeks ago, our clinic and the Presbyterian Church of Cameroon has launched a campaign to educate and enable and encourage 500 community leaders and pastors to talk about the problem, to guide their people to the clinic for treatment and to learn about preventive measures, to purchase and use condoms. On the wall of the Presbyterian Synod office in Cameroon is a poster:

AIDS—ABC
A—Abstinence before marriage
B—Be faithful
C—Condoms

That is what it means to follow Jesus into the heart of the city, into the very living, breathing, center of human life where human beings live and love and die.

The day ends for Jesus when he goes to the temple, looks around, and leaves. He will not start the revolution. He will not use violence to make his point, his point being that God is a God of steadfast love who does not remain on the peripheries of life, the life of the world, your life and mine; does not remain on the periphery, but comes to the very center, to your heart, and asks to be there, to live with you there, to reign as Lord in your heart.

The philosopher Nietzsche despised Christianity, said it was a religion for victims. Not this day.
You simply cannot observe this day—his compelling courage, his fearlessness, his fierce and passionate love, his brave face set like flint—without wanting to be more courageous, more willing to lay it all on the line, to love more passionately, more fiercely, to be adamant yourself that you will follow him wherever he leads, that you will plant your banner and live your life with new intentionality, new purpose, new courage and love.

Ride on, ride on in majesty!
In lowly pomp ride on to die;
Bow thy meek head to mortal pain,
Then take, O God, thy power and reign.
Amen.